

6th October 1966

Professor J.D.Watson,
Harvard University,
The Biological Laboratories,
16, Divinity Avenue,
Cambridge 38,
Mass., U.S.A.

Dear Jim,

When I first heard you were writing 'Honest Jim' I was very doubtful about the desirability of its being published (my letter of February 18th). I was, however, very interested to read it and to see to what extent modification might improve it. Now, faced with the semi-final draft and the publishers' form for signature, I have thought the whole matter over again and find myself taking the views I expressed in the beginning. To suggest that a book should be suppressed is something one does not like to do but I am oppressed by thoughts of the undesirable effects of publishing the book. It is, in my opinion, unfair to me, and this has made it more difficult to sort out my thoughts.

I am with you in being tired of polite covering-up and misleading inadequate pictures of how scientific research is done, but I think there is sense in the way scientific people - and academics generally - have tried to shield each other from vulgar gaze. With increasing interest in science there is going to be more and more pressure to take the lid off, but if the old conventions are to be replaced it is important to choose carefully how. There is already much spilling of beans in military memoirs and by lawyers, politicians and journalists, and confidential matters are revealed increasingly soon after important events. Some tendency this way is probably inevitable in the academic world but do we want to accelerate it? Because you are a scientist of the very highest standing, a book from you would be a sign to others to go ahead with accounts of their feelings and impressions concerning their work and collaborations. Meanwhile, scientific research becomes of increasing social importance and as a human activity badly needs scientific study -

in particular, the history of contemporary science needs developing. Clearly this needs to be done in a scholarly way. I think publication of your book would impede such development.

The book would present to non scientists a distorted and unfavourable image of scientists. The DNA story is not typical of scientific discovery; for one thing it was unusually involved with personal difficulties. Most top scientists are fairly civilised, but your book, though you may not intend it, would give many people an impression of Francis as a feather-brained hyperthyroid, me an overgentlemanly mug and you an immature exhibitionist! This would not be fair to any of us or to scientists in general. I think you will agree that the barrier between arts and science is a bad thing and that there is real need to establish, in the intellectual and academic world, science as a cultural activity deserving respect. Most people realise that scientists have human failings like everyone else, and that scandal and intrigue is often present in their world, but I think your book overemphasises this. It would be undesirable too if you gave the impression you enjoyed revealing scandal.

The book is likely to arouse considerable interest and cause newspaper people, etc., to pester me to confirm or deny what you say. I do not want to be pestered and I do not want to be forced into a position where I might say that you were an eccentric who should not be taken seriously. Nor do I want to stand on one side while Rosalind is discredited. She was my colleague and, however just your account of her might be, I cannot approve its publication: she would certainly not if she were alive.

None of my objections applies to a thorough study of the whole history. If writing your book stimulates such study it will have been very worthwhile.

Yours

M.H.F. Wilkins